

What's a Wipeout Look Like Again?

by Ltjg. Nathan Norton

Being a West-Coast squadron based on the East Coast presents unique challenges in preparing for deployment. After ferrying our 10 aircraft from Oceana to North Island (during the Christmas holidays), staging and moving all our gear from C-130s to the boat, then transporting all our people across country, we still had to bounce and CQ before the CVN got underway.

Holding the coveted status of most junior JO, and therefore most junior RIO by default, I was assigned to do all of my flying with our brand-new XO, which made me nervous at first. My apprehension quickly faded as our crew coordination and habits gelled. It felt good to be back flying after holiday leave and a lengthy POM period. We flew three uneventful bounce periods at NAF El Centro before it was showtime.

As a junior JO, I rode the C-9 out to NAS North Island, walked aboard the CVN early the next morning, and then manned the duty desk during the initial fly-on and CQ. I tried reviewing as many CV NATOPS procedures as possible.

The next morning, the XO and I briefed for our day CQ hop. Our day requirement of two touch-and-goes and two traps should have been easy because most of the wing's aircraft had not yet flown on.

Approaching the cat, we went through our single-engine procedures and repeated, "Cat one, cat one, cat one," over the ICS just in case we might have to suspend. It felt like years since our last work-up period, and I was trying hard to keep abreast of all the activity on the flight deck.

I rogered the 58K weight board as the XO finished his takeoff checks. The wings were out, the flaps came down, and it was time to run up the engines. Over the roar of our TF-30s, I heard the XO begin to methodically step through the wipeout.

"There's forward..."

I swung around to glance back at the horizontal stabs.

"Aft..."

I saw the stabs peek up above the wings.

"It doesn't feel like we're getting enough aft stick," the XO quickly reported. Once again, I looked back and could see the stab popping up from behind the wing.

"Stabs are coming up, sir..."

"Suspend!" he shouted.

I frantically broadcast to tower, "Suspend cat one! Suspend cat one!"

Following our director, we throttled back and did some quick troubleshooting. The XO asked, "Are you sure the stabs were coming up enough? It just didn't feel like we had the normal stick authority. It felt like we were only getting about fifteen to twenty degrees."

I replied, "Sir, the stabs are coming up. Whether it's enough is hard to tell, but you definitely had some authority back there."

We decided to give it another try. Again, the power came up and the XO started through the wipeout.

"Forward...aft..." I saw the exact same amount of stab as before.

"Left..."

"Four left!" I called, watching all of the left spoilers pop up.

"Right..."



“Four right!” I reported.

“Left rudder...right rudder.” The flight-deck troubleshooters were all giving the shooter a thumbs-up. “Well, everyone says we’re good to go. Ready?”

“All set,” I replied.

Everything up to this point had looked fine to me, but at the end of the cat stroke, we both knew something was terribly wrong. My eyes were now glued to the standby gyro and altimeter. We had 10 degrees of attitude, but the altimeter was barely climbing. By the time I could sputter, “Altitude!” the XO was already shouting, “I got it! I got it! I got it!”

The altimeter slowly climbed through 30, then 50 feet. After a couple of choice four-letter words, we slowly turned crosswind, climbing to 600 feet to enter the CQ pattern. After we trapped, we taxied out of the landing area and immediately signaled to the flight-deck coordinator that the jet was down. After a quick hustle by ops and maintenance, we were in another jet.

Again, we taxied to cat 1 and went through the takeoff checks. This time, the wipeout looked surprisingly different. I looked back and saw a full 33-degree deflection. The stabs weren’t just peeking up from behind the wing; they were blocking my view of the JBD. Our earlier decision to launch had been a huge mistake.

First, while I had checked to see that the stabs were moving, I didn’t really have a good idea of how a proper wipeout looked. Sure the stabs were moving, but what did 33 degrees really look like? I had been watching, but not really analyzing, the control surfaces as they moved.

Second, there is no excuse for not knowing NATOPS. As soon as the XO said he was only getting 15 to 20 degrees of aft-stick authority, bells and whistles should have been going off in our heads. I learned later we had only been getting 16 degrees of authority, not even half of the normal 33 degrees. Sitting on the cat in tension is not the time to discuss limits and NATOPS trivia. It is in the rare instances like this when all the hours in the big blue book pay off.

Lastly, we let others pressure us into taking a jet flying that had some serious, albeit insidious, problems. An experienced flight-deck crew thought we had a good control check, but, as the saying goes if there’s doubt, there is no doubt. It just didn’t feel right. We made a bad decision and almost paid for it.

A postflight inspection found that a horizontal-tail authority stop had failed in the wrong position, resulting in the limited stab authority. Incidentally, the same problem occurred in our second jet after a subsequent trap. 🛩️

Ltjg. Norton flies with VF-211.